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ABSTRACT

Talk is an important medium of instruction and assessment in schools. By talking to pupils and listening to what they have to say teachers assess and support pupils' learning. For pupils to be successful and make the most of the learning opportunities offered, it is important that they become active participants in the discourse of the classroom. However, classroom observations reveal that class or group discussions are often dominated by a small number of confident, not necessarily articulate children. Many other children remain silent, frequently showing reluctance to join in the social and academic discourse of the classroom. The fact that quiet, seemingly compliant, behavior does not pose an obvious threat to classroom discipline means that the educational and emotional needs of quiet pupils often go undetected. Drawing on in-depth case studies of habitually quiet students and their families, this paper examines some of the emotional, psychological, practical and social factors which inhibit pupils and thus, form barriers to communication. Removing these barriers is important if educators are to empower quiet pupils to play a more active role in their own education. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/RS)

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Janet Collins

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Barriers to Communication in Schools

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Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference (September 11-14 1997: University of York)

Abstract

Talk is an important medium of instruction and assessment in schools. By talking to pupils and listening to what they have to say teachers assess and support pupils' learning. For pupils to be successful and make the most of the learning opportunities offered, it is important that they become active participants in the discourse of the classroom.

However, classroom observations reveal that class or group discussions are often dominated by a small number of confident, not necessarily articulate children. Many other children remain silent, frequently showing reluctance to join in the social and academic discourse of the classroom. The fact that quiet, seemingly compliant, behaviour does not pose an obvious threat to classroom discipline means that the educational and emotional needs of quiet pupils often go undetected.

Drawing on in-depth case studies of habitually quiet pupils and their families, this paper examines some of the **emotional**, **psychological**, **practical** and **social** factors which inhibit pupils and thus form barriers to communication. Removing these barriers is important if we are to empower quiet pupils to play a more active role in their own education.

communication silence primary education

Introduction

This paper draws on research which began whilst I was teaching in an inner city school. The research originally grew out of my frustration at my inability to communicate with, and therefore teach, a group of quiet withdrawn pupils who seemed unable or unwilling to talk freely in school. These quiet children did not have a voice in the classroom. They did not contribute to large group or whole class discussions. In addition, some seem reluctant to talk to their teachers on a one-to-one basis. I was concerned that, at least in the school context, this silence seemed to be habitual. These quiet pupils did not exhibit a wide repertoire of behaviour. It was as if they did not have access to a wide variety of responses; it was as if they had no choice. A belief that language is central to children's emotional and cognitive development suggests that habitual silence in school is detrimental to learning. Moreover, non participation in the social and academic conversation of the classroom prevents children from making the most of the learning opportunities presented to them.

My doctoral thesis (Collins, 1994; 1996) drew on in depth case studies of twelve quiet children and their families. These case studies were based on interviews with pupils, parents and teachers, classroom observations in primary and secondary schools and an intervention programme. The aims of the thesis were:

> To examine underlying factors which may contribute to a child's reluctance to participate in class lessons.
>
> To devise and implement teaching strategies which develop pupil's self-esteem through positive relationships, thus empowering them to take an increasingly active role in their education.

Since the completion of the thesis I have been able to maintain contact with six of the families involved in the original study and continue to update their case studies. In addition, I am in the process of carrying out a series of interviews with teachers, educationalists and an opportunistic sample of people who identify themselves as having been quiet or shy at school. This paper, which focuses on barriers to communication in school, draws on my doctoral study and an early analysis of recently collected data.

Barriers to Communication

Writing in the sixties Andrew Wilkinson commented on the fact that spoken language, or oracy (his term), was neglected in English education. He suggested three reasons why pupil-directed talk was neglected in school:

> One is certainly **practical** - that it is much more difficult to teach oracy than literacy. These difficulties are connected with such matters as the size of classes, the problem of control, the thinness of walls and the absence of teaching patterns. The second is connected with the **structure of society** - its attitudes, assumptions and rewards. The third is **psychological** - lack of knowledge until comparatively recently of the relationship between language and thought.
>
> (Wilkinson, 1968, p 124)

My observations of classroom interactions reveal that, for some children at least, oracy continues to be neglected in school. Class or group discussions are often dominated by a small number of confident, not necessarily articulate children. Many other children remain silent, frequently showing reluctance to join in the social and academic discourse of the classroom. The fact that quiet, seemingly compliant, behaviour does not pose an obvious threat to classroom discipline means that the educational and emotional needs of quiet pupils often go undetected.

Developing the point made by Andrew Wilkinson, my ongoing research highlights the **psychological**, **practical** and **social** aspects of silent behaviour in school. In addition, my work suggests that silence in school is related to **emotional** factors. In this paper I examine these four aspects and identify teaching strategies which have proved useful in empowering quiet pupils and encouraging them to find a voice in the classroom. Implicit throughout this paper is an acknowledgement of the need to re-examine pedagogic and curriculum issues in order to meet the educational, social and emotional needs of quiet pupils.

Emotional Aspects of Silence

I have said elsewhere (Collins, 1994; 1996) that a pupil's quiet behaviour may be related to their feelings of anxiety, their difficulty in forming relationships with teachers and, in extreme cases, serious emotional trauma. Interviews and observations of quiet pupils in a number of settings reveal that quiet pupils feel anxious about being asked to speak in class. Aberash acknowledged that being shy was "normal" it was also extremely frightening and "you get scared out of your wits".

The extent to which this anxiety prevents learning is highlighted by Joan who, many years after leaving school, recalls how her own acute shyness prevented her from focusing on the content of the lessons being taught.

> I mean, you're just sitting there like uptight all the time because I suppose it's a form of ... you're so concerned about yourself... I mean I have to be honest about it, about what people think about you that you just dread everybody looking at you. And therefore you just go into yourself. You sit in a... you know, your whole life's ... you're planning things. Where are you going to sit. Where you would be seen the least. Honestly, you know... and just living in dread of the lessons that you um ... where you are going to have to take part. So in the end I think I just sat at the window going into little dream worlds of my own.
> (Joan)

Because she was anxious about talking in front of large groups of relative strangers Joan excluded herself from the public conversations of the classroom. By remaining quiet and allowing other more vocal members of the class to dominate discussions she denied herself valuable learning experiences in which she would gain experience of talking and learning through talking.

All the quiet individuals I have worked with comment on how anxious they felt about talking in large group or whole class situations. Some also found it difficult to talk to their teacher in one-to-one situations. These difficulties were often related to problems in their relationships with their teachers. Joan is aware that her daughter Natasha is habitually quiet in school. The fact that she is less quiet at home with her family suggests that Natasha's quietness is related to feelings of insecurity in school and a lack of relationship with her teacher.

> Natasha is very quiet and especially in sort of group situations. Which I felt as well that um, it wasn't all one sided. I felt there maybe was a relationship thing there as well, between teacher and child. I think I felt that Natasha was actually was very careful with her work but she won't be hurried. But she definitely is a quiet child in class. I mean, there's no doubt that she is. She's not at home. But she ... but school's different ... see it's different isn't it? I mean she's got the ... she feels secure at home. She can just be herself. You're not that secure, I mean from my own experience when you're in a class of children. Some of them are very extrovert you know.
> (Joan)

Natasha avoids all but essential dialogue with her teacher, and even then the conversation is perfunctory. A lack of relationship with her teacher prevents Natasha from talking to her even on a one-to-one basis. Joan is concerned that this lack of communication might have a detrimental effect on Natasha's learning.

> Once the children have done their basic work they can go and do whatever they want. And I would say to her, 'Have you been on the computer Natasha?' And she'd say, 'No mummy because..' she said 'all the other children go on but I don't get a go because they've asked the teacher.' But she wouldn't ask the teacher, you know so she'd never get on the computer hardly.
> (Joan)

Interestingly, whilst Joan is frustrated that her daughter is being deprived of opportunities to work on the computer she also sympathises with the teacher.

> It must be very frustrating. They don't know what to do with somebody who's terribly shy. Because they're trying not to draw attention to you because that is what you are trying to avoid. If you're very sensitive they can't cope.
> (Joan)

By comparison, other people have spoken angrily about what they now see as wasted opportunities. For example, Carol felt ignored by her teachers.

> I felt I was totally misunderstood. I left school feeling that no-one had really known I'd been there. I felt I had left school and I'd been failed in some way because I felt that I could have achieved a lot more than I actually did.
> (Carol)

Chris also remembers being reduced to tears by 'authoritative and insensitive' teachers who would reduce her to tears. A lack of rapport between pupils and teachers is likely to be detrimental to learning.

As this account demonstrates, habitually quiet behaviour in the classroom can indicate a lack of relationship between pupil and teacher. However, in a minority of cases quiet behaviour can mask deep seated emotional difficulties. In *The Quiet Child* (Collins, 1996) I reported how Heather's quiet behaviour in class was related to the fact that she was for some years sexually abused, first by her father and then by her step-father - a fact denied by her mother, to whom Heather naturally turned to for help. Consequently, even as a small child, Heather was forced to face her situation alone. She 'coped' by bottling up her anxieties and remaining quiet throughout primary school.

Sadly, my ongoing research has uncovered other stories of physical and sexual abuse. There are, for example, many parallels between Susie's and Heather's stories. Both were quiet and withdrawn in primary school where their teachers were unaware of their acute emotional trauma. Both rebelled against the abuse in adolescence leaving home to live rough on the streets. Both have become involved in prostitution, drug abuse and crime. In so far as Heather is now receiving appropriate professional counselling there is hope that this story, at least, might lead to a happier sequel. However, as a former teacher, I am horrified that the plight of these girls was not recognised sooner. Because no-one took the trouble to get to know these quiet and unassuming pupils they were denied the space to disclose their abuse. As Andrew Wilkinson (1975) pointed out, ignoring someone is in itself a form of abuse.

> There are various ways it is possible to damage human beings psychologically: by annoying them, insulting them, threatening them, persecuting them. But often it is far more effective to do none of these things: to do nothing to them, to leave them entirely alone. So in prison solitary confinement is recognised as a severe punishment. (Wilkinson, 1975, p 95)

There is a sense in which Susie and Heather's inability or unwillingness to make themselves visible to their teachers unwittingly subjected them to periods of solitary confinement. Work to empower all quiet children should help to prevent other quiet pupils from similar feelings of isolation.

In working with quiet pupils it is important to remember that these are extreme cases, quiet behaviour does not, of itself, indicate physical or sexual abuse. However, the experiences of Susie and Heather illustrate the need for teachers to be aware that habitually quiet withdrawn behaviour can mask serious emotional trauma. I would argue that there is a need for teachers to become more effective in the identification and support of pupils with acute emotional difficulties.

Strategies for overcoming the emotional barriers to talk for all quiet pupils involves reducing anxiety and emphasising the importance of quality pupil-teacher relationships in school. In my experience small group activities in which pupils select and work with their preferred 'talk partner' can be an effective way to reduce anxiety. Quiet pupils found it less stressful to talk to their chosen partner than to contribute to whole class discussions. Moreover, selective use of tape recorders allowed them to be heard by their teacher.

In addition to work in the classroom, my initial research provided me with an opportunity to carry out one-to-one interviews with pupils and their parents. I found that setting aside time to talk with, or better still listen to, pupils outside the classroom provided an important forum for them to find their voice in the relative safety of a non-competitive environment. It also provided me with an opportunity to spend time with, and get to know, pupils who are often overlooked in the classroom. I am convinced that this helped to improve relationships between myself and the pupils.

The development of good quality relationships in school, between teachers and pupils and among peers, is central to the process of empowering quiet pupils. Such relationships provide quiet pupils with feelings of security which allow them to take a more active role in their education. In a chapter entitled "The Social and Emotional Context for Learning" Sally Beveridge (1993) acknowledges that the informal or 'hidden' curriculum of relationships and interactions at school can, "pose considerable demands on pupils with respect to their social competence and their personal resources, such as self-confidence" (Beveridge, 1993, p 91). However, as the following section demonstrates, teachers also need to be aware of what Andrew Wilkinson called the psychological aspects of habitually quiet behaviour in school.

Psychological Aspects of Silence

In the quote at the beginning of this paper Andrew Wilkinson identified "lack of knowledge until comparatively recently of the relationship between language and thought" as his third reason as to why oracy was neglected in school. Since the sixties there has been a wealth of research into the importance of talk for learning (see for example, Barnes 1979; Edwards and

Westgate, 1987; Galton and Williamson, 1992; Mercer, 1995; Cortazzi, 1997). Moreover, the implementation of the National Curriculum in which Speaking and Listening constitutes a third of the English curriculum highlights the importance of spoken language. It would seem that the importance of talk in schools is now widely recognised.

However, despite the rhetoric about the importance of spoken language teachers and educators are slow to recognise the plight of habitually quiet withdrawn pupils. The following quote is from a former teacher and education officer who is currently researching issues related to exclusion of pupils from ethnic minority groups. Despite his substantial educational experience he confesses to not having previously considered the 'problem' of silence in schools.

> I have not thought about this one before. But silence is a problem in the context of western pedagogy because we require oracy in the classroom. The interaction is one of answering and talking and group interactions and so on and so forth, and silence does get in the way of teaching particularly by those who are committed to a particular style of teaching. So it does get in the way of working with students and bringing them out to talk about their involvement in the sort of classroom activities which have come to be typical in schools. So it is a problem. It is a problem having students talk about their concerns when teachers and others want to counsel and consult with them. It is a problem in assessing the youngsters when we want to ascertain where they are at in terms of literacy and numeracy for instance. So the phenomenon of silence does pose problems to teaching and learning in our classrooms. But it does not... it does not pose a behavioural problem. It is not something which gets on teachers' nerves. It is not a behavioural problem which causes teachers distress and which impacts on the rights of other students.

(Research Fellow)

In this quote the researcher clearly identifies silence as a problem in terms of teaching, learning and assessment in school. However, his acknowledgement that silence is not a behavioural problem for teachers and other pupils might well suggest why, despite his years of experience in education, he has not thought about the issue before. Interestingly issues relating to numeracy and literacy have occupied much of his time despite the fact that, as with oracy, these are not in themselves behavioural problems. Why, I wonder, do we allow pupils to remain silent when so much time and resources are spent in trying to overcome their inability or unwillingness to read or write?

In *The Quiet Child* (Collins, 1996) I argue that we should regard pupils who habitually exhibit quiet non-participatory behaviour as having special educational needs and that recognising those needs is an important first step in empowering pupils to play a more active role in their education. My reasons for linking habitually quiet behaviour and special education needs are two-fold. First, quiet non-participatory behaviour is, of itself, detrimental to learning. Second, quiet behaviour is often associated with, or caused by, emotional difficulties such as anxiety, poor self-esteem and difficulties in forming relationships with others. However, in many respects making this connection is paramount to creating a new definition of emotional and behavioural difficulties. Whilst emotional and/or behavioural difficulty is the second largest category of special educational need identified in school (Beveridge, 1993) it is not normally used to define habitually quiet behaviour.

The nature and extent of emotional and behavioural problems are wide-ranging and, apart from the most severe cases, difficult to define. Teacher judgements are based on their professional experience and are likely to incorporate comparisons with the general standard of conduct in the class. Inevitably though, they may also be influenced by personal values and expectations about what is considered to be appropriate social and emotional behaviour. It has been suggested (for example, ILEA, 1985) that teachers are less alert to signs of emotional difficulty that create problems for the individual pupil than they are to the more overt behaviour that presents them with problems of class control. Others, (for example Croll and Moses, 1985), argued that teachers do differentiate between problems of discipline and other forms of educational and behavioural difficulty. This view is supported by Beveridge (1993) who suggests that:

> On the whole, it would seem that pupils are identified by their teachers when their behaviour is judged to interfere with their own learning or that of other pupils, or to disrupt their relationships with peers and staff.
> (Beveridge, 1993, p 49)

However, evidence suggests that quiet withdrawn pupils are often overlooked in busy classrooms. Moreover, the fact that few writers include habitually quiet behaviour in their definition of disaffection implies that the term 'emotional and behavioural difficulty' is more likely to be used to define loud, disruptive and potentially aggressive pupils.

Recognising the social and emotional needs of quiet pupils is an important step in empowering them to play a more active role in their education. However, another major hurdle is overcoming the practical difficulties associated with classroom discourse.

Practical Aspects of Silence

Teachers working with quiet pupils are faced with a dilemma. Allowing pupils to be passive observers deprives them of important learning experiences, but these pupils may appear to be so nervous that even the gentlest persuasion seems like a violation. As has already been recognised, it can be difficult for teachers to know how to handle extremely quiet pupils even in a one-to-one situation. As one nursery nurse has found, earning the trust of quiet pupils can be a painfully slow process.

> Leora's a very quiet child. She won't approach you, she's a distant child. When she first started nursery, you walked towards her, she used to back off. So she's one that I had to treat in a different way. I used to like her to know that I knew she was there. So with her I had to sort of walk past her but smile and say, hello Leora, but carry on walking. Because she felt threatened if you stopped and talked to her. She you know, and now she looks at me and now she's ... she's been here five months and she's got only to the point where she looks at me now and she smiles across the room. You know and I smile at her and tell her, oh Leora, oh you look nice today Leora. I like that dress. We've got to the stage where I just stop quickly and say something to her and then move on. She can't cope with this staying with her at all. Like today I had to twice attempt to talk to her and I went round and she wouldn't talk. She'd put her face in the wall and in the end I left her alone.
> (Nursery Nurse)

Many quiet pupils experience these kind of difficulties in talking to their teacher on a one-to-one basis. However, a common theme running through all the quiet pupils' accounts of classroom talk is the difficulties they experience in getting or holding their teachers attention particularly during whole class discussions. The limitations of whole class discussions are well documented (see for example, Barnes, 1979; Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Cazden, 1988; Swann, 1992) and will not be reiterated here. However, as many teacher who have tried to organise pupil-directed small group activities will testify, it is not sufficient to put pupils together and request that they talk collaboratively.

During my original study I worked with the quiet children in withdrawal groups and in their normal classroom. I felt it was important to begin by establishing the importance of talk for learning. I wanted pupils to experience and appreciate the ways in which they could learn, and subsequently demonstrate their learning, through the medium of the spoken word. Consequently, during my work with them, talk was the medium for learning and effective talk was seen as an end in itself rather than as a precursor for writing.

Systematic recording, analysis and assessment of talk seemed to be sufficient to convince the pupils of the value of what they were doing. Reference to the English National Curriculum which gives speaking and listening equal status to reading and writing added weight, in the staffroom as well as the classroom, to my assertion that talk was important. In addition to using the tape recordings for teacher assessment I also used exerts of successful discussions as teaching aids to give pupils an opportunity to discuss the nature of their talk. Peer review and self-assessment of talk became an important feature of the process of empowerment. This involved identifying the rules of discussion as well as strategies for initiating and sustaining effective discussion and making these explicit to the pupils.

During this intervention programme the lessons were highly structured with the pupils knowing exactly what was expected of them. Whole class discussion was kept to a minimum with the emphasis being on the children completing open-ended tasks with their chosen talk partner. As the pupils gained confidence there were opportunities for them to work in larger groups and, where appropriate, to present their work to the rest of the class. Establishing genuinely open-ended small group discussions forced me to re-examine my role in the classroom and to take account of the pupils' own agendas.

Social Aspects of Silence

Andrew Wilkinson suggested that, historically, a transmission model of learning was attractive because it encouraged children to be passive recipients of knowledge in order to fit them for their appropriate role in society and, "Had they been encouraged to speak, they might have answered back" (Wilkinson, 1968, p 125). Certainly, a move to pupil-centred small group discussions involves an important shift of emphasis as the teacher becomes a facilitator of enquiry rather than custodian and final arbitrator of knowledge. Asking pupils to collaborate in small group activities is effectively giving them greater control over their own learning. As pupils address the tasks set for them they naturally develop them in their own ways and to meet their own needs. However, when pupils are encouraged to ask questions there is a danger that they will raise important, personal and potentially controversial issues. These may be outside the aims and objectives of their teacher. They may even be issues beyond the expertise of the teacher. Teachers forced to acknowledge their lack of expertise are no longer able to maintain an image of themselves as the custodians

of all knowledge. Whilst this image is, by definition, both unrealistic and false, it does protect individuals from addressing what they fear are their own inadequacies as a teacher.

During my work with quiet pupils they introduced a wide range of issues including; bullying, drug abuse, terminal illness, death and abortion. Sometimes, as in the case of bullying, the issues had direct relevance to the pupils' experience of school. Other issues, such as abortion, generated interesting general debate. Far more difficult to handle were disclosures of child abuse and blatant criticisms of the school. The way in which I was forced to acknowledge the pupils' own agendas is best illustrated in relation to the pupils and parents discussion of racist issues within the school.

During the research the pupils and their parents spoke frankly about their experience of racism in school and in the local community. These open exchanges during one-to-one interviews revealed deep tensions between the African-Caribbean, Asian and white communities. They also revealed areas of potential conflict between the values of school and those of the wider community.

Aberash's parents spoke angrily of the racism which they experienced as members of the African-Caribbean community. They also spoke at some length about what they perceived to be institutional racism in the educational system. Aberash's mother and step-father were extremely critical of the school because, in their view, it had failed to implement what they saw as a anti-racist policy.

> What's used to defuse the argument is multi-cultural education and "let's do some bhaji, let's cook an Indian food, I'll wear a sari today, and that's multi-cultural education" - that is not multi-cultural education, multi-cultural education is the culture that's multifaceted and unfortunately education in England is very one-sided, it's really a culture to satisfy whites perspectives of Black people.
> (Aberash's step-father)

Aberash's parents bemoaned the shortage of Black teachers in their daughter's school and believed that continual exposure to white images and value systems led to her Anglicisation and a denial of her cultural roots. However, their demand for a more multi-cultural policy in the school was in direct contravention of other parents wishes.

Aberash's parents were clearly in favour of multi-cultural education. However, Mandy's mother rejected the local comprehensive because of it's multi-cultural policy. Her older children had experienced some trouble when they had attended the school and she wanted Mandy to have a better start to her secondary career.

> I know it sounds wrong, but it's all for a certain culture of people down there. Because to be honest with you, I still believe the local comprehensive is for Pakistanis and all that because it's not for white children. They are trying to teach white children all about Pakistan. And for me it is all wrong. This is their country and they should be learning about their country and their standards.
> (Mandy's mother)

Interestingly, one of the Asian families I interviewed also rejected this particular school because of it's reputation for racial disharmony and lack of discipline. Rasheeda's mother was unhappy for her daughter to go to a school with a high Asian population "Because Asian children are always causing for trouble". Moreover, Rasheeda's elder sister talked about her experience of the secondary school and how Asian children cared more about causing trouble than they did about their education.

> They used to you know, swear in Pakistani, you know - rude and er used to get names and that's how the fight begins you see, you know all swearing or hitting somebody, you know telling somebody to hit you...
> (Rasheeda's sister)

Clearly the local comprehensive had a poor reputation with both Asian and white families in the area. However, Mandy's mother's rejection of multi-cultural education went beyond criticism of a particular school. She objected to being asked to provide money for Eid celebrations in Mandy's primary school.

> I don't think it's right at all. I mean, if they come to live in this country they are supposed to live by our law, by our ways. Because we'd have to do it over there anyway. But I just don't like it. And there's no way I'd give Mandy money to pay for Eid. No way at all. I feel so strongly about it. Once or twice when there has been Eid I've kept Mandy off school. I mean she mixes with Asian children, she plays with them. I don't mind that. I just don't like her being pushed into learning about their ways.
> (Mandy's mother)

Clearly Aberash and Mandy's families had completely different views about multi-cultural education. However, whilst neither group was happy with the provision made by the school, none of the parents I interviewed felt willing or able to discuss their concerns with the staff of the school. They seemed afraid to challenge the status-quo and risk alienating the teachers. Whilst this made for a significantly easier time for the teachers, it also meant that their relationships with parents, and consequently with pupils, were based on a false premise that they shared common opinions and ideals. This is hardly a firm foundation for education. Given the potential conflict between the values of home and school on the issues of racism there was little wonder that the school was experiencing some difficulty in reducing the incidence of racist behaviour between pupils.

In common with the majority of teachers, I tried hard to foster what I believed to be racially enlightened attitudes. However, I believe that real success in this area would only begin when the school adopted a whole school policy which included dialogue with parents and other members of the community. One-to-one interviews and home visits appear to be particularly useful if parents, and indeed pupils, are to be able to talk frankly about their experiences and feelings. If such an approach were to be adopted then it would be important for schools to find ways of handling both implied criticism and the need for some degree of negotiation between parents and teachers.

Giving pupils and their parents a voice in the classroom is important in the genuine pursuit of shared understanding between pupils and teachers. Moreover, the move to pupil-directed small group activities requires the teacher to face up to and, where necessary address the pupils' own agendas. As well as adopting a different role in the classroom teachers also have

to overcome what Robin Alexander (1984) has dubbed "the primary ideology" which presupposes that children are innocent and have to be protected from the harsh realities of life.

In primary education there is a long held belief in the inherent innocence of children and the need to protect them. However, I would argue that for many children this primary ideology, which seeks to protect them from unpleasant aspects of life, does them an acute disservice by denying their actual lived experiences. For example, all the pupils in this study lived in an area noted for domestic and racist violence and drug related crime. Where these issues are part of pupils' lived experiences they should not be denied by school.

> Crack exists and some of the biggest runners for crack and cocaine are eleven and twelve. They are not adults. Another issue is child abuse. There is a patronising way in which we talk to kids about child abuse, yet they go home and they get abused at home. It's like I've seen teachers talking about racism to Back children in a way that makes them laugh. Teachers don't come out and talk about these issues as they really are.
> (Aberash's Step-father)

Ignoring issues such as drug abuse, or dealing with them in a patronising way, is likely to alienate pupils and deny them the support they need to deal with potentially traumatic issues. Moreover, without a debate of these issues pupils have little opportunity to reflect on their lives and envisage alternative ways of being.

Conclusion

In this paper I assert that dialogue between pupils and teachers is a vital part of the educational process and that pupils who do not have a voice in the classroom are disadvantaged. Through an examination of the emotional, psychological, practical and social barriers to communication I established the importance of effective small group activities in empowering pupils to take a more active role in their education. However, I also acknowledged that giving pupils a voice in their own education is fraught with tensions. Dialogue occurs between people who are prepared to meet as equals in a trusting relationship. This is extremely difficult for quiet pupils who may have a poor self-image and experience difficulties in forming and sustaining relationships. Moreover, inequalities are inherent in the school system. Even in the most liberal of classrooms pupils and teachers do not meet as equals. Teachers who wish to give credit to the existential experiences of their pupils are constrained by their own standards and expectations and those of the school. Consequently, pupils and parents who wish to be accepted by the school learn not to disclose views which challenge the school ethos. Where the potential mismatch between the attitudes of home and school are not addressed pupils are forced to exist in two irreconcilable worlds. This must add to their anxiety about talking in school.

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